Four by
Horror
short fiction
tom upton

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PROTECTED
BY
F.A.T.

He was certain the garage was safe. There were no security guards, no cameras on any of the levels, and the guy stationed in the booth at the exit left at ten at night. After that the place was all his. Over the past three years, he had taken out six cars-- one of them a Lexus-- and never had a hitch.

Still he never took things for granted. He always made sure to shave and to comb his hair and he wore dark blue clothes that looked like a uniform. If anyone saw him in the garage he would appear to be some sort of attendant. He doubted he would run across anyone, not at two in the morning, but it was best not to take a chance.

Once inside the structure, he moved quickly to the staircase, which he took down to the underground levels. He emerged on the orange level, the lowest level. That was where he had always found the best cars, as though people believed their expensive vehicles were safer the further underground they parked them. People were stupid; if they really wanted to protect their cars, they would cough up some extra money each month to park them in a garage with some security. It was another instance of you get what you pay for, and the customer often comes out on the short end of that deal. Somebody would tonight-- that was for sure.

He walked down the aisles. Even with the lighting dimmed for the night, the pickings looked good. He immediately spotted a late model Cadillac and a Volvo, both of which looked interesting. It really didn't matter what he snatched tonight. It was open game. Benny, the guy who swapped the hot cars for an envelope full of green, had told him he would take anything-- just so long as it was good. Most of the

time Benny had special orders, which were a bummer; you'd sometimes have to go to three, four places looking for a certain make and model.

His footfalls echoed against the gray concrete walls. No matter how hard he tried to step lightly, he couldn't be quieter. That didn't bother him, though, because he was sure nobody was around to hear him. What troubled him more, really, was the sound of water dripping and echoing. It had not rained in days, he was certain the structure had no plumbing, and there were no puddles anywhere on the ground. So what was it with the dripping? It was one of those inconsistencies his mind tended to latch onto, distracting him from the business at hand.

His mind cleared, though, when he spotted a target too good to be true. It was a Lexus, newly waxed, gleaming even under the reduced lights. It looked identical to the car he'd snagged last year, and he grew giddy with the thought that maybe it was the same owner, probably some guy who had started out life as a spoiled brat whose parents had fawned over him and bought him whatever he'd wanted-- so unlike his own parents, a drunken mother and an absent father who hadn't had two nickels to rub together three days after they'd got their paychecks.

He approached the car, as though stalking it, expecting one of those annoying talking proximity alarms to start spouting that he was getting too near the vehicle. There was no warning from an electronic voice, though, and he walked round the car coolly appraising it. He ran his hand over the shiny rear bumper, trying to recall how much Benny had coughed up for a Lexus last year. Was it three thousand or thirty-five hundred? Whatever the case, tonight would be a big payday.

When he saw the license plates--IB ONE-- he couldn't helping laughing out loud; it was the same owner, the same stupid owner who lost a car last year because he was too cheap to pay a few extra bucks a month to park in a more secure garage. Some people never learned. He was sure he'd find the owner had the same cheap alarm system; last year, it had taken he all of five seconds to disable the alarm.

As he started toward the driver door, ready to do business, a black and white sticker in the corner of the rear window caught his eye. At first he thought it might be sticker from some organization-- the VFW, the AMA, or the Shriners-- but when he got a close enough look at the sticker to read it, he let out short loud laugh, loud enough to echo through the level. The sticker read:

Protected

By
F.A.T.
(Feral anti-theft troll)

Oh, this is priceless, he thought. He had seen stupid stickers that were supposed to deter a thief-- "Protected by the national alliance of police officers," "$500 reward for the conviction of any person who tampers with this vehicle"-- but this sticker took the cake. Whoever owned the car must be a complete moron. "Anti-theft troll," he muttered, rolling his eyes, and then slid up to the driver door.

He reached into his pocket, and pulled out the electronic pick. It looked like a little gun. Out of its front extended three wires that you inserted into the lock. He pulled the trigger, the wires raked the tumblers, and in a few seconds he heard the lock snap open. It never failed-- no matter what the manufacturers said about their locks being pickproof.

Before he swung opened the door, he readied himself. The alarm-- no matter how cheap-- would sound, and sound loudly in the hush of the garage. He would find the right wire under the dashboard, and snip it as quickly as possible. The siren might sound for only a few seconds, and anyone nearby-- if there were anyone-- would think it was somebody taking too long to disarm their alarm.

He yanked the door open, and jumped inside. It took him a full second to realize no alarm was sounding. He straightened up behind the steering wheel. Confused yet cautious, he shut himself in the car. No alarm at all? That was almost unbelievable. He discovered there was no GPS to worry about, either; the car couldn't even be remotely tracked. Finally he spotted the ignition key: still in the ignition. He began to giggle at his good luck. He settled back in the seat, adjusted it to his height, and relaxed, breathing in the aroma of leather seats and eying the real wood-- cherry wood, wasn't it?-- dashboard. But then he began to wonder. Can somebody be this stupid?-- especially after losing a car just last year. It didn't seem possible. It was all too easy, but then, after all the tough breaks he'd had in life, maybe he deserved easy now and then.

He found the nylon CD wallet on the passenger seat. When he checked the CDs, he learned that the owner listened to some hopelessly corny stuff: Percy Faith, The Highwaymen, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. The only good CD in

the wallet was Ozzy Osbourne-- obviously a Christmas present the guy hadn't had the heart to return.

He slipped Ozzy into the player to check out the stereo, which was expensive and excellent. He paused to relish the moment; he could take his time now, just drive out as if he actually owned the car, and an easy deal like this wouldn't fall into his lap for a long time-- maybe never again.

After listening to Ozzy sing awhile, just as he began to feel truly blissful, he thought he heard a noise, a faint click or clack, coming from outside the car. His body instantly stiffened, sensing someone might be near. He lowered the volume on the stereo. He peered warily out the side window, and eyed the rows of varying vehicles to see whether maybe somebody had come to retrieve their car. He spotted no one and relaxed back into the seat. Maybe it was just that crazy, inexplicable dripping sound, he thought, but still listened sharply.

When he glanced in the rearview mirror, he saw that the trunk had popped open.

"What the hell," he said. He scanned the dashboard. There was a trunk release somewhere, he was sure, but he was pretty certain he hadn't triggered it.

He climbed out and went to the back of the car. The trunk yawned at him. It was empty-- no lug wrench, no jumper cables-- nothing. A vaguely musty odor mingled with the new-car smell. He shut the trunk, and it snapped securely locked. He lingered a moment to see whether the truck would pop open again. Maybe there was some kind of short circuit. That was the last thing he needed; if while driving down to Benny's, the trunk should pop open while passing a cop... Well, that was just the kind of weird thing that landed even smart people in prison.

Just as he was about go back into the car, he heard something. It was a faint shuffling sound. It sounded nearby but he couldn't be certain. He walked to the back of the car, again, and round to the passenger side. He didn't see anything, and figured it must have been some kind of animal. Maybe a cat, or a sewer rat, which can grow quite large.

When he walked back round to the driver side, he stopped dead in his tracks. The door was now shut. He was positive he'd left the door open. Or had he? No, he must have shut it-- he was the only one around.

He got back into the car, now determined to leave. The joy of the moment was gone, placed by a vague uneasiness.

When he reached forward to turn the ignition key, he felt a sudden

searing pain in his shoulder. He cried out in surprise as much as agony. He shoved open the door and tumbled out on the cold concrete. He got to his feet, clutching at his shoulder, and stumbled a couple spaces over, where he fell to the ground between two other vehicles. His puzzled mind raced. What the hell was that? His hand came off his shoulder bloody. The material of his shirt was ripped, and he could see the three deep gouges in his flesh. White foam was bubbling out of the wound, as though it had been doused with acid. He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket, and tried to wipe away the foam, which only made the wound burn more.

The car stereo suddenly stopped, Ozzie cut off while singing "I'm Going home." All he could hear now was the enigmatic dripping and the racing of his heart. This couldn't possibly be happening, but it was, and the entire world seemed to be taking on an otherworldly slant. All he knew for sure was that he had to get out of here, and get out fast. He dug into his pants pocket, and pulled out a switchblade. He knew better than to carry such a thing while working, but now, as he snapped the knife open, it lent him some degree of security, of certainty-- the familiar metallic clack as the blade flicked out and the way even the dim lights above glared off the its mirror-like surface.

He crawled behind the two cars that sheltered him, and peeked round back toward the Lexus. Whatever had hurt him was not in sight. He started to figure it had to be a dog-- sure, a dog that had been sleeping in the back seat. But then another part of his brain pointed out that dogs can't shut doors and turn off car stereos.

Half stooping, half-walking, he headed toward the exit. He hadn't taken a few steps before he again heard that curious shuffling sound; it didn't sound like a dog moving, either, unless that dog was obese and dragging its hind legs. The sound stopped, then, and all he could hear was water dripping. He turned slowly around, taking in the entire level, but saw nothing. Just as he was about to continue toward the exit, something rushed past him. He blinked his eyes. It had moved by so fast it looked like a brown and green blur that dodged between two cars in front of him.

It's trying to block me off, he thought, not sure what he had seen but holding the switchblade a little higher at his side. If the thing-- whatever it was--got in his way, he would kill it-- that was for sure.

But the thing didn't give him a chance. Brown and green flashed by him again, this time very close, and pain bloomed in his hand. When he looked down he saw that two of his index and middle fingers were gone and blood was gushing from the two stumps. The fingers lay on the ground next to the shattered switchblade. His

screams echoed through the level as he dropped to his knees, holding his ruined hand before him. He wrapped the handkerchief around his hand, and it took only a couple seconds for red to start showing through the white cloth. He reached down and picked up his two severed fingers and slipped them into his shirt pocket. They could sew them back on, sure, when he got to the emergency room-- if he got there.

He stood slowly and took in the level again. Nobody was around. He started to run toward the stairs, as well as he could run hugging his hand to his chest. Whatever was after him was fast, very fast, but as he neared the exit he was sure he would make it out. Then, over the heavy clomping on his shoes on the floor, he heard a whisper of movement come up from behind him, and he screamed and fell hard to the floor as something took a chunk of flesh from his leg. He sat there looking at the large hole in his pants, just above the side of his knee. The wound was down to the bone and quickly filled with white foam. The pain was so intense, his eyes began to blear and he thought he was about to pass out. Sounds were coming from his mouth, now, squeaky, whimpering sounds. Then, in the agony of his pain and confusion, a thought occurred to him, a thought that made him so giddy he started to chuckle, and then laugh hysterically. It's just like Benny would do with a car-- chop it down until it was all gone.

When he looked up, he saw a tiny figure wearing a brown hat and a green suit. Its face was vaguely human, but looked deformed; the brown eyes were too large and had a single line of coarse dark hair over them, the nose was a bulb of flesh, and the teeth that were showing were black and pointed and made a hideous grin.

The creature moved so fast it appeared to vanish. It felt as though bumped up against him, and the next thing it knew blood was gushing from his neck. He gagged as hot liquid ran down into his throat. When he grabbed at his neck, he felt that part of it was missing. All his strength drained from him, then, and he fell back flat against the floor. The florescent light on the ceiling grew steadily dimmer, and the last things that he heard were the dripping of water and the sound of a trunk being slammed shut somewhere far away.

The Wee Handymen

Benny had shared the cottage with them for two years now, yet he had never seen their faces. At first he believed they were all in his mind. His heart medicine did that sometimes-- made him see and hear things that weren't there. But then things in the cottage changed, and that was when he knew they were real.

He called them the wee handymen, because they fixed things. He would waken in the morning to discover the broken latch on the back door had been repaired. Or the front picture window that had been cracked in a hail storm would suddenly be new. Or a loose stair leading down into the basement would be tight and freshly painted.

The cottage had been in poor shape when they first arrived. Benny had lived alone for years by now; his wife had died, and his children had long moved on and seemed to have forgotten him. He managed to care for the cottage the best he

could-- pretty well, if you'd asked him-- but then old age, to which he always believed himself immune, crept up on him. After that, both he and the cottage started a slow painful decline. Things fall apart, he'd tell himself, and things wear out-- in people and houses alike. Whenever he went through his photo albums--which was more often, the older he got-- he would pause at pictures of the cottage when looked newly built, and he experienced the same wistful feeling he had when he saw his likenesses of himself when he was fresh out of high school. And if he'd see a shingle lying in the yard after a heavy storm he thought repairing the roof every bit as unlikely as the doctors repairing his heart.

After they had come, though, everything changed-- not just with the cottage. His hope rose to see the cottage again as it once was, and started to believe there might be hope for him, too. What they were doing was sort of a miracle. He'd never bought paint, and there was none around the house, yet the rooms had been painted one by one, drab shades green and tan replaced by bright yellows and soft, soothing blues the color of a cloudless spring afternoon. The outside of the cottage had been re-stucco-ed and painted white. The original woodwork had been stripped, stained, and varnished. New carpets had appeared one morning. So from where had all the material come? It was not all in his mind. He had even asked the mailman to come in one day to confirm that the worn old linoleum in his front hall had been replaced by shiny Italian marble tiles. It had to be a kind of magic they worked, and if they worked it on a house, couldn't they work it on him?

Each day, when he wakened, he'd said good morning to them, certain that they were always near. He'd shuffle through the cottage in his ancient slippers, searching for any new work that might have been completed during the night. If he found something-- that the kitchen cabinets had been replaced, say, or that there was a new medicine cabinet in the bathroom-- he praised the workmanship, saying encouraging things, like, "It's a fine job you boys did last night. Keep up the good work." If he couldn't find anything-- which wasn't often-- he'd walk about the house fretting, saying, "Boys, boys, don't tell me you left me now. A day's work of a day's pay, you know. You keep this up and I'll have to lay you off."

One day Benny looked around the house and saw that no more needed to be done. That was the moment he feared the most-- when they had no more to do. Would they leave him then, leave him all alone? The thought was unbearable; he had grown so used to knowing they were around. Even if they never did show themselves or talk to him, it was comforting to know that when he spoke someone might be

listening.

He went to the kitchen to make himself a breakfast of scrambled eggs and dry toast. When he sat at the table he had a sudden stabbing pain in his left side. He had had them before, sure, but this was the worst. It would get no better, either; the doctors had warned him his heart was simply wearing out-- it was only a matter of time.

He endured the pain until it passed, and then finished his meal.

"Boys, I've been wishing there was something you could do for me," he said, and then listened. He heard nothing, though, not the slightest whisper of footsteps he sometimes heard when he woke in the middle of the night. "Now, boys, I know you can do miracles. I've seen what you've done with this house. It hasn't looked so good since Martha-- rest her soul-- and I first moved in. I'm sure you can do something for this old heart of mine." He waited, but there no response-- not a sound. "Well, I know you can hear me. I'll just let the matter rest with you. If you see fit to help me, fine-- if not, I'll bear no ill wishes on you."

Nothing happened after that. Each morning he awoke, he felt the same tire heart beating in his chest. He would sigh heavily, and then put on his robe and slippers and set about his daily routine. Every inch of the cottage looked beautiful and new, but that hardly seemed to matter because he was still old and dying.

"You went and abandoned me, boys, haven't you?" he would say now, sure that he was alone. "Everybody leaves, I suppose. First the kids grow up and move away, and then Martha… Somebody always gets left behind. That's natural-- like things wearing out and falling apart. Well, I guess, I have the comfort of knowing that once I'm gone, somebody else will get a beautiful house. Whoever it may be, I hope they have kids, kids with good memories."

About a week later, while retrieving the mail out front, he noticed that the garden had been planted with flowers and that the old plastic garden borders had been replaced by new brick ones. He was again filled with joy and hope. Of course, he thought, how could I have been so stupid? They've finished on the house, sure, but still there is the yard. He shambled down the stairs and around the house. He hardly every went outside, except to get the mail and throw out the trash, and he was amazed at the improvements that had been made. The cracked and chipping walkways had been replaced or repaired. All the gardens had been tilled and planted, including the large vegetable garden in the back yard, where he and Martha always grew tomatoes, carrots, bell peppers, and radishes. His eyes began to well at the sight of the green

breaking through the soil and the little white markers that named which vegetable was going where-- just the way Martha and I used to do it, he realized. He saw, too, that the grass was cut and all the edgings done perfectly. The many trees around the house, which shades the cottage well, had all been trimmed. Everything was green and budding under the bright spring sun.

"Boys, boys, you've outdone yourselves," he said, walking about and looking at everything in wonder. If any of his neighbors had heard him, they would surely have thought him crazy-- wandering around the yard in his bathrobe and slippers, and talking to somebody who wasn't there.

He reached the back of the yard, where, in the shade of an ancient oak tree, four beams rose about four feet from the ground. The beams were set in new concrete, and he walked around them, scratching his head.

"Now, what have you got going on here?" he wondered, for he couldn't imagine what they had in mind. They had never before built anything new-- just repaired what had been there. The beams were not spaced far enough for it to be a garage, and besides, Benny didn't own a car-- he gave up driving years ago. Maybe a tool shed, but that didn't make any sense either, since he had to tools to store. "Well, whatever it is," he said, "you just go on building. You've done a damned fine job of sinking the posts." And he headed back to the cottage to make breakfast.

That night he slept fitfully. At two in the morning he rose to go to the bathroom for the third time, wondering whether his kidneys were starting to go out now. He stopped in the kitchen and paused to look out the window at the dark back yard. He was still puzzling over what they were building out there, and finally he could not resist his curiosity. He went through the back door, and out into the night. The air outside was chilly, and the sky was clear and a-shimmer with stars. The full moon cast an eerie light on everything. As he near the old oak tree, he could see more work had been done. The four posts now held up a rectangular platform that was about eight feet by six feet. What the heck is that supposed to be? he wondered. Maybe a deck?-- a deck for me to sit on under the shade of the tree? It seemed plausible, although it would be an awfully strange place to build a deck. Certainly a deck seemed more appropriate built onto the back of the house, with a new sliding glass door opening onto the kitchen.

"Well, I suppose you have something in mind," he murmured as he walked away. "I do hope you're still considering my request," he added in a grumble. "One day I'll not be waking up to find all the fine work you're doing." He stopped

briefly to see if there would be some response, but there was none, and he went back to bed.

The following morning, he discovered that stairs had been added to the construction. Although he delighted in the craftsmanship of the wooden steps, he was no more enlightened as to what the little fellows were erecting. In ways it did indeed look like a deck, but it was entirely in the wrong place, and also a bit too high. When he climbed onto the deck, he found that one of the thick limbs of the tree was situated directly overhead; if he were to sit on a lawn chair on the deck, he would surely hit his head on the limb every time he stood.

"Nonsense," he snarled in frustration. "You boys are disappointing me now. You give me a new heart and I'll show you how to build a deck. Why, look here, it's way too high, and besides that, it looks like you pieced in the deck itself. Why would you do a thing like that? They should all be long solid boards, the same as you used on the back porch. You just make me young again, and I'll show you how it's done," he swore, and waited for a reply that never came.

That night he rolled back and forth in bed as he slept, until finally he went to far and fell to the floor, hitting his head on the nightstand leg. He used the edge of the bed to push himself up to his feet, swearing in the darkness. He felt the wetness on his forehead, and knew he was bleeding, and so he swore some more. He swore at being old, at losing his wife, at children who never visited or even called. He swore at being alone. He swore about many things, but mostly he swore at the wee handymen, who, he was convinced, could fix his heart but instead were building some silly thing in the yard.

When he flipped the light switched, he discovered the power was out-- and that caused a new spate of curses. He felt his way into the living room, and tripped over something in the dark. He started to fall, his body tensing as he anticipated hitting the floor hard. But then something caught him. It was, in fact, a bunch of somethings: hands, little hands, grabbed him and pushed him back up to his feet. They are real, raced through his mind, as the tiny hands helped him stand.

"Thank you, boys," he said, when he was again balanced. "I might have hurt myself there-- may be pretty bad." He turned about to see if he could catch a glimpse of them, but it was too dark.

The little hands, which had remained on him, now began to push. They pushed him forward inexplicably.

"Hey, hey, watch it," Benny complained. "What do you think you're

doing?"

But he felt the hands, on the backs of his legs and buttocks, shove harder, driving him slowly into the kitchen and toward the back door.

"Hey, cut it out," Benny cried. "I'm not dressed to go outside. I'll catch my death, you know?"

But the hands pushed so hard he went crashing through the back door. He was free for a moment, just long enough to trip and tumble down the back stairs and out onto the newly laid patio. The wind was knocked out of him and he could barely breathe.

"What are you doing?" he asked weakly, when he could finally speak at all. He struggled to his feet, and stood there wobbly waiting for an answer that never came. "I don't get you now. You fix my house for me-- fix it like new-- and now this…. What?-- do you mean to kick me out and kept the place for yourselves? Was that the plan from the start? Well, you can't do that; I own this house." He waited for an answer, but there was only the sound of crickets. "Or did I ask too much of you?" he considered.

The back door opened a bit, but, squinting hard, he could see nothing.

"Was that it?" he asked. "It was too much to expect you to fix my heart? Is it a crime for the dying to wish to live?"

As if in answer, he felt the little hands on him again, grabbing, pushing, stronger than he could imagine. They pushed him toward the back of the yard, and soon his feet were off the ground, and he was being carried as he wailed in protest. All he could see was the black sky filled with stars, and then, as they approached the old oak tree, he saw against the full moon, the shadow of a noose hanging from the limb that hung over what he'd thought was a deck.

The Wind

1

I wish to remain an enigma to them. They can never know how simply and naturally my mind works. They come to visit me still, now and then-- sometimes a woman, sometimes a man. There has been talk of book, maybe even a movie deal. It is not as it was in the beginning, though, when countless visitors came to ask countless questions, and, to their pleas of cooperation, I turned them all away. Cooperation to what end? And for whose benefit? I was steadfast in my rejection of them, until it became generally known that any request to question me would meet with denial, which is one of my remaining rights. Still, occasionally, some eager and undaunted soul will wander my way, seeking enlightenment, enlightenment only I can bestow upon them, not knowing-- never being able to guess even-- that they don't really want to learn what I have to teach. The simplicity of my being, the straightforwardness of my nature, will startle them. They will be terrified at the realization that I am not-- as has widely been reported-- a monstrous deviation of a human being, but instead only an iota different from them. The idea will trouble them at first, and then horrify them when they realize only a minor transmutation will make us exactly the same.

They are the air and I am the wind.

I am tempted, of course, to speak to them, but only to gain privileges that are not now accorded me. Since I have been here, nearly three years now, I have been treated like any other inmate. I have not spoke, have not proved myself any different from the others. The heinousness of my actions-- here I do call them actions because I don't consider them crimes-- does not set me aside from the general populace of the gray hotel. Others have committed acts just as brilliant. The end result seldom matters; it's the reasoning behind the acts that separate the geniuses from ordinary men. It is a world in which a cow, or a gorilla or a common alley cat can be taught to toss paint onto a canvass, but that will never make them Picasso. For the time being, I languish in the company of animals.

Each morning I wake before dawn, and from the upper bunk, watch as sunlight fills the cell. The bars of the high window cast long thin shadows across the stainless steel toilet. A solitary sparrow sings a song outside. Beneath me Birdsong stirs in his bunk, muttering in his sleep. Sometimes he cries. Poor Birdsong-- simple, ignorant-- he couldn't begin to fathom with what he shared his cell. When he first arrived, rolled-up mattress-- more like a futon, actually-- tossed over his shoulder, toothbrush stuck out of his mouth, he asked repeatedly what I was "in for." I told him only that I was an artist of the misunderstood, to which he tipped his shaved head in wonder and grunted faintly, glaring at me with defiant dark brown eyes. "Well, I jest axed you a simple question," he said, and then brooded about the cell. When he insisted on repeating the question now and then, I finally told him I was in for tax evasion, which he didn't understand, either. "What's tax e-vasion?" I explained it to him, and he said, "Sheee-it, they 'spect you to pay dem money outa dat? Means I been getting 'way wid more stuff than I thought."

His nervousness annoys me. His ear is constantly cocked toward the chuck-hole in the door, always listening for the faintest sound that would indicate somebody new was being brought in. Then he will hop over to the door, and peek through the chuck-hole. If it turns out to be somebody he knows, he will hoot and holler at them, and then turn back toward me to relate the person's life story, which consisted mostly of all the "stuff" they ever did. If it is somebody strange to him, he will run his hand over his shiny scalp and mope back to his bunk, and lying down, mutter, " 'Taint nobody 'tall."

I secretly believe that they have inserted Birdsong in my cell with purpose. It is an unwritten punishment; they know Birdsong will irritate me, will disrupt the tranquility of my being. They also realize that I will never harm him. He is

black, poor and ignorant-- a common, inconsequential gang-banger; the lowest of the society's bottom-feeders-- hardly an adequate canvass upon which to create. They are trying to steal my peace, and although I am loathe to admit it, they are succeeding. With each day that passes, the smoothness of my existence gains another tattered edge. I contemplate dispatching my nuisance. They then would put me in solitary, were the company is infinitely more agreeable. But such a deed-- creation for affect-- would violate my sense of idealism. No, Birdsong is safe, proving God does indeed protect best the stupid and lowly.

Perhaps I will agree to speak the next time somebody comes along. Then I would get a cell of my own, maybe some books. I would be cooperating.

Oddly, once I decide to talk at last, it takes weeks for somebody to come for a visit. The rotund guard pounds on the steel door, bellows my name through the chuck-hole. He walks me down the catwalk, two or three feet behind me, our heels clang-clanging as we walk. The open air of the block is dizzying. I fear for a moment that I may have developed agoraphobia. The cloying odor of disinfectant fights the lingering reek of sweat and urine. Dull faces peer out of the chuckholes of the cells we passed as we head to visiting.

It turns out to be a woman, this time, sitting there on the opposite side of the wide table. The guard waddles me over to the seat across from her, and then leaves. A guard on either side of the room stands statue-like, pretending not to listen to personal conversation, staring off into nowhere.

The woman is pretty, with small pixie features. Her lower lip trembles slightly as she regards me for a moment, before speaking.

"I wasn't expecting you to come down," she says. I don't respond; it wasn't a question. She tries to smile pleasantly. Her teeth are perfect except for one incisor, which is twisted slightly crooked. Her tiny hands flutter on the yellow legal pad on the table. There may be something to work with here, I tell myself. He reminds me of a girl I knew in Florida, a body-less girl whose head sat atop a vanity, with unblinking eyes staring at the mirror.

She told me, then, the name of the newspaper for which she worked. Newspapers are of no consequence to me. It may have been the New York Times or the Buttville Bugle, for all I care. I wait patiently for her to ask something.

"You never grant interviews."

"Is that a question?" I ask.

"No, I was just commenting," she says nervously. Oh, yes, this one is

timid. I can smell her fear. I already know her story: not long with the newspaper, can't get a serious story assignment, ambitious, sent her by her editor who knows, is just absolutely positive, it's a waste of her time but he sends her anyway, just to get her out of his hair. "I've been here a couple times before, when you refused to come down. I guess I'm not entirely prepared," she admits, rolling her eyes. What color are they-- green, hazel-- I can't tell.

"Well, you could always come back next week," I say, and start to stand.

"No, no, no, please," she says, and I like the tone of her voice, the genuine panic, the glorious sincerity of the plea.

I settled back down on the folding chair.

"Please bear with me," she continues. I briefly consider that her ingenuousness is an act, a deception to gain-- what? But no, it fits her too well. She drops her eyes thoughtfully, and then looks up and says, "You never even attempted to mount a legal defense."

I try to remain patient with her, but feel like folding my arms before me, shutting her out.

"Are you here to ask questions?"

"I'm sorry--" she says, hedging.

"I'm very literal minded," I inform her.

"Are you?"

"*I* think so."

"I see," she says carefully, and then asked, "Why didn't you try to defend yourself?"

"Why should I?"

"Is that an answer?" she wonders, and there is a slight edge to her tone. I think I'm starting to like this one. She doesn't, after all, seem afraid I will walk.

"Perhaps we should make ground rules."

"I ask the questions. You give the answers," she suggests.

"Agreed, but what's in it for me?" I ask, to which she seems bemused, as though by talking I will be getting something off my chest and the relief from that is reward enough.

"What do you want?"

"I need a private cell, books, maybe a typewriter."

"I'm just a reporter," she says.

"You have an editor, right?-- an editor who could talk to the warden."

"Yes," she says slowly, thinking, jotting something on the yellow pad, "but I'm not sure-- I mean, I can't make any promises."

"Well, will you try to get those things for me?"

"I'm sure inquiries can be made," she says, cautious.

I frown. I think of going back to the cell with Birdsong fidgeting around relentlessly. "I guess that will have to do for the time being."

"So we can start?" she asks, hopeful-- surely it can't be this easy.

"What's your name?"

"Oh, Alice," she says. "Alice Gardner."

Alice from the palace, princess of the newsroom. To my astonishment she actually stands and starts to reach across the table to shake my hand. She stops in mid-gesture, when one of the guards, suddenly coming live, steps forward, and with a sharp wag of his head reminds her that physical contact with the inmates is prohibited. "Oops," she says, and withdraws her hand and settles back in her seat.

"It's the thought that counts," I say.

She sits there a moment, fighting back embarrassment.

"Now," she continues, again composed, "why was it you never tried to defend yourself?"

"There didn't seem to be any point to it."

"But the evidence they had linking you to these four murders was less that overwhelming. Didn't you believe you can get an acquittal?"

"My confession was a simple statement of fact," I say. "They asked did you do it, and I said yes. There really didn't seem to be any reason to deny it all."

"So, then," she starts, groping for the proper wording, "you wanted to be caught?"

"No," I say simply.

"You were not-- overcome with guilt?"

I chuckle, thinking, *Man, they got this one from somewhere way out in the cornfield.* "Guilt?-- you're kidding."

"You felt no remorse at all?" she asks as though the idea was novel.

"I've never really viewed any of my actions as crimes," I told her.

She jots something down on the legal pad, her hand quickly flitting across the page. I can't tell whether she's writing in some kind of shorthand or her handwriting is really so bad. Still writing, she asks, "Am I safe right now?"

"Are you thinking I'm crazy or something?-- because I'm not. Nor do I

believe the entire world is crazy." I paused to look down at my hands. They are large and ungainly. They seem unfamiliar, yet I know they are mine. They have been folded, resting on the table-- the way I had to keep them when I was a child attending parochial school. The nuns used to crack you across the knuckles with a ruler if you didn't keep them just so. "That's just the thing about signing a confession; it halts all lines of inquiry-- there is no trail and no further investigation. Are you thinking that if there had been a trial, maybe I wouldn't be here now, but in a hospital room somewhere, receiving a lithium drip twenty-four hours a day? If you are, you're wrong; I'm no more insane that anyone else. You're perfectly safe right now," I add sincerely.

"So you don't have the urge to kill me?"

"No, just to hurt you a bit," I say.

Surprisingly she isn't shocked. Maybe she got the joke. She has stopped writing, and is staring off into space. When she refocuses on me, there is a coy glint in her eyes.

"There wasn't any sign of sexual activity in the four women," she notes.

"Again, is that a question?"

"They were young and attractive."

"I suppose."

"So that was irrelevant?"

"Absolutely," I say.

"Well, how did you choose your victims?"

Though I disagree with the use of the word 'victims' to describe those I have killed, I realize this is the best question she has so far asked, a question that will lead to an answer which will sound bizarre-- just what her readers will want to hear, because they are 'normal,' they are corn growers and apple pickers, and they don't want hear that someone even vaguely 'normal' has committed an act they perceive to be atrocious.

"Even the police were never able to determine how you choose," she continues, awaiting a response.

"There was no method I could see."

"Then it was all totally random?" she asks.

"No."

"Well, how…" She frowns, confused, and deep lines run down her smooth forehead. "It's seems to me," she says then, "that it would have to be one or

the other; either there was method or it was random."

"I--" I hedge, and she leans forward in her seat, her interest growing. She knows she has hit on something, some twist of reality that may prove fascinating. "It will sound strange. It will sound as if I was crazy-- but really I'm not…." She is staring at me, waiting for me to continue. "Sometimes I will see a person," I say, "and there will be something about them…. I will see a luminosity."

"A what?"

"A glow," I confess.

"Sometimes when you look at people, they appear to be glowing?" she asks carefully.

"They *are* glowing," I say.

"And this is how you choose your victims?"

"I really don't believe I had anything to do with that part."

She starts to scribble on the legal pad, her hand fluttering across the yellow sheet for a long while, no doubt documenting each and every word that proves my insanity.

"I know how it must sound," I say, but she is busy filling up the page with indecipherable words. When she looks up from the page, she takes a gulp of air as though she has held her breath. "It is what it is," I tell her, then. "I've never been able to explain it."

"What, exactly, does it look like," she asks.

"I don't know-- it's a glow."

"Does it have any color or anything?"

"It's sort of yellowish."

"When was the first time you saw it?"

I have to pause and think. I have lived very much in the present, experiencing life moment by moment, and hardly ever dwell on the past. At last the moment returns to me. It was many years ago. I was about eleven years old, and I played little league at the park near my home. One spring day we were playing a game, which the sky above grew steadily darker, stranger gray clouds, thinly bordered with gold, roiled in from the west over the factories across the street from the park. The clouds seemed to move unnaturally fast, and the spectators-- mostly the parents of the players-- gazed skyward in wonder at the eerie motion of the sky. A drenching downpour came, then, soaking the field instantly, solid gray sheets of rain pelting the ground. Players and spectators ran for cover, though there wasn't much to be found. I

ended up under a towering tree next the left field foul line, the branches waving wildly high above me in the harsh wind. It was a terrible place to be during a storm, but I didn't know that then, and my parents, who, for some reason I can't recall, never attended my games, weren't there to warn me how you should never stand beneath a tree during a storm. I watched as puddles formed in the deserted infield, still hoping the game might resume, not realizing that the umpire had already called the game and that the players and spectators had fled to their cars and were heading home. I just watched the field as it grew muddy. I don't know how long it took me to notice I was all alone in the park, sitting there at the base of the tree, resting back against the trunk. I think someone was supposed to pick me up, but no one came. I listened to the sound of the falling rain, and smelled the rich aroma of wet soil. I guess I dozed off, then, waiting. When I awakened, I saw two small figures crossing the park, angling toward me. It looked like two smudges of yellow creeping closer, until I could make out that they were a couple little kids wearing yellow rain coats-- the kind of yellow raincoats other kids probably teased them about, the kind nobody wanted to wear but some parents still bought and forced their kids to wear. They had the yellow hoods pulled over their heads, and tied tightly with the drawstring under their chins. To me they looked like little ducklings waddling now across the baseball field, paused to jump in a puddle. I laughed to myself thinking, Quack-quack, quack-quack….When they were near enough, I could see that they were twins, their round faces, framed in the opening of the hoods, looked dull and vacant, as though they possessed no soul or spirit but were empty vessels. They seemed to become lighter, then, the contours of their forms growing fussy and bright. I felt a sudden revulsion toward them, the way you feel if you suddenly see a cockroach crawling across your kitchen floor-- something hideous and out-of-place-- something that must be squashed, destroyed, because it doesn't belong. And if you don't dispose of it, the world will not be right. There is something purely vile about it, and your aversion to it is instinctual. You stomp on it without a second thought. It cannot be allowed to live. If you don't kill it, you will not be able to sleep even, knowing it's out there, some where you can encounter it again and again.

I explain it all to Alice, who listens patiently, nearly mesmerized, jotting down a note now and again.

"So it all started over-- what?-- forty years ago?"

"The best I can remember," I say.

"And you didn't start acting on this until… six years ago? What took so

long?" she asks.

I do not respond.

She stares down at her notes, idly tapping the paper with the end of her pencil.

"That's an awful long time to fight off such an urge. It is an urge, isn't it?-- like a natural urge, maybe?" she says, as much to herself as to me. She stops tapping the paper, then, and looks up at me. Her eyes are bright, and somehow oddly rounded. I can see now that they are, indeed, hazel, a blend of color and specks as complex as life itself. "It didn't start six years ago, did it?" she asks, though it is clear she already knows the answer. "When, then?"

I just sit there, staring at my hand. They must be kept just so.

"You killed them, didn't you?-- the twins-- way back when."

"I couldn't do otherwise," I say.

"And nobody knows?"

"Nobody ever asked," I say.

She stares at me, incredulous. "You're kidding, right?"

"The police are not terribly bright, nor the state's attorney," I say. "They are very short-sighted. They were probably gratified that I confessed to what I was being charged with."

"How many," she asks. The thrill within her grows, bleeds out and becomes apparent, making it sound like a demand. "How many over the years?"

"I want a typewriter, and a private cell."

"If your co-operation results in the solution of other crimes, I don't see why you couldn't get those things. I'd say it was certain, though I still have to talk to people. All I want for now is a number. I'm not asking for details. I just want to have an idea what we're dealing with here, so I know what to tell people. Just give me a number."

I cannot look up at her. If I do, I may laugh and if I laugh, I may not be taken seriously.

"Two hundred and sixteen."

2

When the former Miss Corncob Queen left yesterday, she appeared distracted. Unthinkable thoughts, no doubt, rolled round in her mind. I'm certain that she regained her composure on the ride back to her office, and by the time she sat at her desk-- probably located in some isolate corner of the newsroom-- already had her Pulitzer Prize acceptance speech partly written in her head.

That is if she actually believed me.

This morning dawns like any other. The sparrow outside my window still sings the same lonely tune. Birdsong snores softly below me, muttered something now and then. I hear him fidget on his bunk, twisting and turning sharply, grunting with every contraction of his muscles. The kid cannot even find peace in his dreams.

There is a break in the pattern, then. Voices on the block, drifting through the chuck-hole of the door, growing louder. It is still too early for breakfast. Someone is outside the door; shadows flicker through the chuck-hole. The door swings open with a loud *clank*, and the shift lieutenant crowds into the room with two guards. I recognize one of the guards. He has been here for years, stocky with ruddy cheeks and an expression that discouraged anyone from speaking to him. The other guard was a new guy, tall and lean, with mean thin lips and the air about him of always looking for a fight. As the lieutenant supervised, the guards step closer, glaring down

at the lower bunk. I am invisible to them at the moment.

"Birdsong," the older guard croaks loudly, and I hear Birdsong stir below me.

The new guy steps forward and kicks at the lower bunk.

"What the fu--" Birdsong muttered drowsily.

"Get your stuff together," the new guy orders.

"You're outa here," the older guard says.

Birdsong must roll over then, ignoring them, because the new guy reaches down and grabs him by the ankles and yanks him out of the bunk. His head makes a sickly thud when it hit's the cement floor. Birdsong is screaming and holding the back of his head as the new guy drags him out of the cell, with the old guard following close behind, wagging his large boxy head.

The lieutenant, who has been standing against the opposite wall, his arms folded across his chest, pushes off the wall. Not saying a word, he reaches into his back pocket, and pulls out a couple pieces of paper folded longwise. He tosses the papers at me, and then turns on his heel to leave. The door slams after him.

When I look at the papers, I see that they are computer printouts filled with a list of books, titles and authors, approved for my reading. I do not feel triumphant. I only feel relieved, relieved to be alone. Even that doesn't last long, as the sparrow outside starts to peep, reminding me I will not get everything want. But then, who does? For the moment, I feel like anybody else in the world, and that seems right and just.

****

"They want to know about the twins," Alice says. She has informed me that her editor spoke with the state's attorney, who in turn spoke to the warden. I am not interested, though, in how these things are done.

"They are interested, then?"

"In the twins-- for now," she says. "As for the rest of it, they tend to believe you're full of it."

"They do?"

"Of course," she says simply. "You have to put yourself in their place. They don't want to believe anybody was out there walking around and getting away with that many murders." She pursed her lips, frowning, an old annoyance resurfacing; she has related the information, has looked at the doubtful faces, and has damned them all for not readily accepting it all-- a major hindrance to her career advancement. For the first time since speaking with her, I felt that we are closer, almost conspirators, allied so that each of us can get what he wants; she gets famous and I get a typewriter. "They don't believe anyone can be that clever."

"But I wasn't clever," I say. "Each and every one of the incidents occurred quite naturally. There was no planning. Everything fell into place."

"How do you mean?" she asks, and opens her briefcase, which has been before her on the table, and begins rifling through papers.

"Just as a person presented itself to me--"

"You mean, by glowing?"

"Yes. Then a way to commit the act presented itself, and then a way to dispose of the person, and then a way to escape."

She finds the sheet of yellow paper for which she has been searching.

"Here," she says, reading the page, "this is what one of the detectives noted about the last four cases-- the ones you confessed to. 'If we hadn't blindly stumbled onto the suspect, the chances are he would never have been caught. The method of each killing was different. The method of disposal of the remains was different. The victims had no notable similarities or connections. No DNA evidence was found. Nor was there any trace evidence, such as fibers. There were absolutely no notable patterns that would lead anybody to believe that the acts were all committed by the same individual.'" She puts the paper back in her briefcase, and looks at me. "And you say there was no planning?"

"No," I say. "But it always seems things just fell into place-- it was always very fluky that way."

"I see," she says. She seems troubled, probably the same way I have been, to define and comprehend the sort of luck that will assist a person who is killing another person. Although it was always naturally, it didn't not seem the least bit

logical; it was always co-incidental, too coincidental, and a logical mind loathes coincidences. "Well, why don't you tell me about the twins? Maybe we can make believers out of everyone. Then you can get your typewriter, and once you have it, write about the rest of it."

So I told her about the twins. I told her how I strangled them, there, in the deserted field, in the rain. I described how I used the drawstrings from hoods, twisting them around their necks until they turned blue and died. When I did it to the first one, the other just stood there mutely and watched. He didn't even make an attempt to run, and that made him seem hollow. There was no soul inside him. There was nothing inside him; he was an empty husk walking the earth, where he didn't belong. His face showed no fear, but just a dull absence of any emotion. Even after his brother lay dead on the muddy ground, he appeared not to understand what had happened, or that the same was about to happen to him. When they were both dead, I left them lying there, out in the open. I didn't try to conceal what had happened to them. Somehow, at the moment, it seemed right. I think, then, I walked home finally. Everything after that becomes very fuzzy in my memory. The only thing I am sure of is that as I walked away through the rain I felt a deep sense of relief.

"Why relief?" Alice asks.

"I'm not sure," I admit, groping for an explanation. "It's as though I had an inkling that had I left these hollow things live that one day something would fill them, something evil, something repugnant and festering, something that would return to me one day. I always felt that there was a purpose to my actions, a larger purpose so vast that I could not recognize it. I was like a cog in a machine. My actions made little sense to me, but in a larger context, which I could never see, everything made perfect sense."

"Sounds like you're talking about fate," she says.

"Maybe-- I don't know. Truthfully I stopped trying to understand it all a long time ago."

"Well," she says, "let me see about that typewriter." She asks me, then, to go over the details of the incident: the year, the name of the park, the city in which I lived at the time….

After she leaves, I wait for a guard to come and take me back to the cell. It turns out to be the new guy, the guy who dragged Birdsong away. I don't look at his face right away, but can imagine the expression of defiance, his nearly lipless mouth twisted cruelly. I watch the way his hands dangle as his sides, twitching ever so slightly.

He says something I cannot understand, some command. When I finally look up at him, I see that a hazy sheen covers his face, extending to an inch or so above and to the sides. I am startled at first; since I have been here, this has not happened. I have believed it was all over, and now I wonder at the meaning of this latest occurrence. I precede him out the door, and he follows me back to the block. At the door leading onto the block, we wait for the guard inside to press the button to trigger the electronic lock. I sneak a glance at me escort. His face is indeed aglow. He gives me a look that asks, And what the hell are you looking at? I turn away. The lock clacks loudly, and the new guy pulls the door open, and waits for me to step in front of him. Inside I see the guard at the control panel, an older black man who has worked here for many, many years. He is still jovial, though, often smiling a smile missing a couple teeth, at all the felons being escorted to and from the block. He grins at me now, and his dark face, etched with deep wrinkles, appears awash in phosphorus. He looks after as we clack down the catwalk to my cell.

After I am locked away, again alone, I puzzle over these new developments. I lie on my bunk, staring at the stone ceiling. A strong cool gust of wind rushes in through the window. It is growing stronger and stronger, until I can no long ignore it. I hop down from my bunk, and look up at the window, which is about a foot above my head. There is nothing to stand on, and so I jump up and grab two of the bars and pull myself up.

Outside the sky is darkening, black clouds roiling toward the gray hotel. The sparrow has fled. I can see part of the basketball court in the yard. The steel netting on the hoop thrashing in the wind. Beyond I see the small boxy brown building that is the kitchen. A panel truck is backing up, easing, toward the side door to make a delivery. The driver climbs out of the truck and it immediately slap by a strong gust of wind. He raises an arm across his face to protect it against the dust and paper bits and other debris that is flying all around. When he lowers her arm, I can see his face; even at this distance I can see that it is shining brightly under the darkening sky.

I let myself drop back into the cell, wondering. There is purpose here, indeed. If you connect the dots, it creates a crooked line but a line nonetheless. Alice is due back after lunch… it will take a couple hours to unload the truck, which will be just after lunch… they guard will come to get me, just after lunch….Everything will fall into place. It always does. Soon I will hear the rain pattering on the ground outside. Puddles will be forming all over. The ducks will come, then-- I have missed

them so. They will waddle around on the muddy ground, jumping in the puddles, splashing the brown water. The wind will whistle around them. It will whistle with meaning and purpose, but the ducks will not be astonished. They will waddle mindlessly about.

Quack-quack
Quack-quack
Quack-quack

CHILDREN FIRST

John Peter Caulden was a godsend.

He was tall, handsome, and intelligent. He was a great speaker, too. He never faltered, and he seemed to be able to keep eye contact with everyone in an audience no matter how large. He was mesmerizing.

Edmund Caffey had been the manager of many campaigns, and he'd never seen anyone like Caulden. The man was amazing, *and* sincere. Selling him to the public was as easy as falling out of bed in the morning.

Even Caulden's short-comings as a candidate were no hindrance to his winning the primary election handily. Caulden wasn't married, but that never became an issue. He was only a junior senior from Louisiana, but nobody thought twice about that. He didn't subscribe to any particular religion, and nobody batted an eye.

Caulden was his own man. Nobody owned him, and that was obvious.

He did things his own way, too. He shunned Secret Service protection in favor of his own security staff, which he paid himself. He took no interviews during the day. Daytime was for work, nothing but work, and he promised that after he was elected, voters could expect that to continue. The country was in a sad mess. It needed a leader with a strong work ethic-- not somebody who spent half his time on public relations. He didn't care about his approval rating. He cared about curing the ills of the nation. He cared about doing the right things in the right way.

His most eagerly accepted view regarded children. Kids were being short-changed. A child without insurance coverage was shameful. A child going to bed hungry was a crime. Children were always falling through cracks in the system, cracks that oughtn't be there. Too long had leaders used children as pawns in their quest for election. Too many promises unkept. But no more-- it stopped now. It stopped with Caulden.

"Children First" became the campaign's favored slogan.

When Caulden gave a speech, the crowded started chanting, "Children first. Children first. Children first…" before Cauldren could utter a single word.

And Caulden, cleverly, never tried to stop them.

By Election Day, the campaign had reached a glorious apex. It was clear that Caulden was going to be the next President.

2

On election night, Edmund Caffey was summoned to Caulden's suite at the Palmer House in Chicago.

Caffey had expected the call. Caulden's opponent, a doleful Republican made more doleful by early returns, had just given his concession speech.

Caffey was ushered into the suite by one of the private bodyguards, strangely tall and broad-shouldered. The monolith of a man was dressed like Secret Service, and outsiders couldn't tell the difference.

Caulden was sitting in a chair facing the window. The bright city lights spread out beneath him. His elbow was resting on the chair arm, as he held a crystal glass of red wine which he swirled softly.

Caulden didn't turn round. He took a sip of wine.

"I wanted to thank you, Edmund, for everything," he said, his voice deep and silky smooth.

"It was nothing, really," Caffey said. He watched the wine glass, its facets sparkling even in the dimly light suite, the long elegant fingers wrapped around the crystal, the index finger drumming thoughtfully on the side of the glass.

"Well, be that as it may, it was a grand campaign."

"Yes, it was," Caffey said, and felt an unfamiliar uneasiness. It was the first time he could recall Caulden being anything but glib and charming. He suspected some

snag.

"Is everything all right?"

"Oh, fine, fine," came the smooth assurance. The hand set the wineglass on the small side table. "I was just thinking how sad I won't need you anymore."

"For the campaign," Caffey said, his uneasiness growing. "You are still planning on taking care of me."

"But, of course. I always keep my promises."

Caulden stood and turned round. He was tall and slender under the custom-made suit. He appeared weary, though, as if the physical stress of the campaign had finally caught up with him. His tanned face looked somewhat drained, or maybe that was because of the lighting.

When Caulden took a step forward, Caffey saw that it wasn't the lighting. Caulden's face looked quite pale, and his mouth… there was something…. As a slight smile played on the lips, the low lip didn't look quite right.

It was only when the lips parted that Caffey saw what was wrong. The two upper canine teeth seemed too low…

Caffey gasped.

"Yes, yes, Edmund. Quite a shock, I'm sure."

Caffey mind reeled. This had to be some sick joke.

"I heartily regret the deception, Edmund. I doubt that you would have agreed had you known the truth."

Without knowing, Caffey had been backing away, and now struck a wall, which wasn't a wall but the huge bodyguard, who had never left the suite.

"But you can't hope to…" Caffey couldn't finish the thought; his head was buzzing, his breathing was tight-- his blood-pressure might be spiking.

"But I can," Caulden said. "I've already done it, with your help. Oh, Edmund, don't look so distressed," he added cheerily. "It's a wonderful thing when a true minority is elected president."

Caffey couldn't speak.

"And now," Caulden went on, rather wistfully, "at least, I must take care of you."

Caffey felt a huge hand clamp down over his mouth and nose, so that he couldn't breathe. His eyes bugged out. He tried to fight free, but it was futile.

"I always keep my promises," Cauldren said. "And rest assured I will keep every one of my campaign promises as well." He smiled, his fangs now showing clearly, and

then added, “Children first, of course. Always, children first.”

--From Scarecrows, due to be released in the spring of 2009.

The old woman was dying. That was plain to see. She seemed so small laying there, on the hospital bed, a tiny lump beneath the white blanket that held the waning heat of a body withered by time. Only her wizened face showed, sunken eyes that didn’t focus on anything anymore, a bony nose, and a mouth whose lips were made of wrinkles, like the opening of an old leather drawstring purse. Her lips were continually moving, as though in silent prayer.

She had been brought in yesterday, transferred from the nursing home when it appeared her respiration was finally fading. Her records showed that she was one hundred and one years old. Neither doctors nor nurses noticed any visitors, and they all assumed she had outlived all her friends and family. A sad thing, that. Everyone dies alone, but this woman was truly alone.

The nurse who took care of the woman during the day was now in her room, drawing back the curtain so the morning sunlight fell across the hospital bed. She paused at the bedside to regard the woman sorrowfully. The woman was hardly aware of her presence. There was nothing she could do-- there was nothing anyone could do. It was just a matter of time now, and no one could even render the

woman some little comfort. Her eyes stared out as if at nothing, seeing the mysteries beyond the veil of death, or if there wasn't anything beyond, then only blackness.

The nurse quietly left the room.

The woman, then, if as sensing someone who wasn't there, seemed to strain to speak audibly. She could manage only to whisper. What she'd been repeating soundlessly wasn't prayer at all-- no prayer anyone had ever heard anyway. "With the storm all the animals become mad. Frogs and snakes will fall from the sky. The waters will rise and cover the land. The storm will wane and leave a terrible silence upon the devastation it has wrought, a silence so deep and disturbing as to freeze a man's soul. And then they will come. They will come invisible at first, and they slaughter everyone…."

She continued to speak these words like a dirge, over and over until she finally died, and no one was ever there to hear them or to contemplate their meaning….

--From *Just Plain Weird,* now available on amazon. com. $12.99 for quality paperback. Only $3.99 on Amazon Kindle.

I realized what a truly awful idea it was, sure, and I should have at least tried to talk her out of it. But I was finding her will very hard to resist. It was very odd, actually; I would not under normal conditions let anybody talk me into doing something so reckless. It should have troubled me that I'd given in to her so easily. Instead, it all seemed natural-- not just natural, but something bound to happen. It didn't seem dangerous or unlawful.

I was grateful, too, to see that she actually did know how to drive.

After a minute or two of her not sideswiping parked cars and not blowing through stop signs, I was able to settle back in the seat a relax. Soon I was even enjoying the ride. Watching the houses go past, smelling the scent of new leather seats, I savored the feeling of not being tied down to one small parcel of earth.

"Nice car," I mentioned.

"It's a Lexus, you know."

"And your father knows you drive it?"

She just chuckled. "I'm still alive, aren't I? What does that say?"

After a long silence, I asked her, "Where are we going?"

She glanced sideways at me, quickly looking me up and down as if she were pleased with something-- maybe that I had been trusting her.

"I figured we'd head out of the city," she said. "See some horses and cows-- maybe we'll find a pond with some ducks or something. I've always found wildlife very calming-- except when animals are eating each other, of course." …

****

That was so very typical of Raffles. Once he'd infinitely complicated one of my problems, he'd just take off and leave me hanging there. All I'd been doing was trying to check out a girl-- a fairly normal activity for a guy my age, no matter what anybody said. Now I had to worry about aliens living next door to me. …